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FROM NEWCOMERS TO CITIZENS: ALL COME BEARING GIFTS

A STATEMENT
of the
NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF
CATHOLIC BISHOPS'
COMMITTEE ON MIGRATION

United States Catholic Conference
Washington, D.C.

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In our country's relatively brief history, we have been blessed with a constant infusion of new peoples who have arrived on our shores with new hopes and dreams, bringing cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity as well as unique talents to the building of a nation that is today the world's lone superpower.

While all too often rejected at first, these newcomers with their different cultures, foods, languages, and ways have all eventually been allowed to make their important contributions to an ever changing, ever new United States of America. Decade by decade these new pieces of our nation have been laid side by side with the old to form the American mosaic, a mosaic that "the Great Seal of the United States expresses [as] an American ideal that should inspire us in its motto: '*E Pluribus Unum*'—out of many, one. This motto, recognizing national unity out of the widest diversity, reflects the reality that our nation is a nation of immigrants."¹ Indeed, except for our Native Americans, we are all immigrants or descendants of migrants—whether voluntary or forced—and each is an indispensable thread in the rich fabric of the United States of America.

While our country's heritage is varied, our strength derives from the integration of our many differences into a national commitment to the ideals of justice and freedom. We are not simply a nation of immigrants but a nation of many kinds of migrants—including those brought here forcibly before and after the founding of our nation²—who seek to embrace fully all that the United States of America is and hopes to be through citizenship. As many today work to achieve the "American dream" in economic terms, citizenship represents the "American dream" to many who arrive on our shores to flee persecution, join close family members, or otherwise search for a better life for themselves and their families.

Through the process of naturalization, the immigrant is transformed into a U.S. citizen: no longer a stranger to political society but a full member, free to assert all the rights and bear all the responsibilities of citizenship. Citizenship formally integrates newcomers into our national community, entitling them to rights such as voting, holding elective office, sitting on a jury, holding certain federal jobs, traveling abroad for unrestricted periods, and enjoying full protection of the laws.

The Current Naturalization System

The process of naturalization confers U.S. citizenship upon an individual after birth who was previously a citizen or national of a different country.³ Naturalization provides an opportunity for newcomers from different backgrounds to recognize more fully their potential as members of their communities and to become equal partners in the civil structures of our nation. Many immigrants have resided in our country for years, paid taxes, started families, and built equities in their local areas. They have demonstrated commitment to their new homeland for many years and have met the arduous requirements for attaining citizenship. While the standards are difficult to meet and the process often discouragingly long, immigrants continue to seek citizenship in unprecedented numbers. In a recent four-year period, the number of those applying for citizenship increased dramatically, rising from approximately 234,000 in 1994 to 2 million in 1998.

Citizenship is one of the most precious of all benefits that the federal government can bestow, and the naturalization process must be administered with an integrity that ensures that only those truly eligible and meeting all the requisite criteria become naturalized. While the naturalization process should be designed to ensure that only eligible immigrants become citizens, we also believe that adequate governmental resources should be appropriated to ensure that citizenship is available in a fair and timely manner to all who are eligible.

Naturalization is funded by application fees, which many are unable to afford.⁴ All too often, naturalization fees are diverted to pay for other needs within the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), such as enforcement activities, administrative functions, and other program costs unrelated to the naturalization process.⁵ As a result, applicants for citizenship are currently experiencing a two-year wait for processing of their applications, with a current backlog of approximately 1.8 million applications. We fear that this backlog discourages those who are eligible for citizenship to come forward and navigate the naturalization process.

To improve access to citizenship for those who meet the requirements, our elected officials must consider supplementing fees for naturalization with appropriated funds. As in the past, "we call on the United States Congress to recognize and support the important task of

ship would not only contravene more than a century of U.S. constitutional principle that recognizes citizenship based on the individual's birth in our country, but also would marginalize new generations of individuals living in the United States and increase racial and ethnic tensions in our nation.⁷ To deny or restrict birthright citizenship would erect a new and artificial barrier between the "accepted" citizens and the "unaccepted" residents of our nation, creating a two-tiered society comprising those who are "privileged" citizens and those who are "alien."

In our 1986 statement, *Together a New People*, the U.S. Catholic bishops' Committee on Migration warned of the creation of a double society in the United States: "It is against the common good and unacceptable to have a double society, one visible with rights and one invisible without rights—a voiceless underground of undocumented persons."⁸ Automatic citizenship for individuals born in the United States must be preserved to prevent an unhealthy and destructive divide in our country and the exclusion of many from full political and civic rights.

Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship

Although the naturalization process is properly designed to ensure that only those who are motivated and eligible become citizens, immigrants pursuing citizenship also must prove their commitment and dedication to national ideals by renouncing fidelity to their country of birth and swearing allegiance to the United States and the Constitution. Upon attaining U.S. citizenship, an individual accrues rights but assumes responsibilities as well. When called upon, citizens must defend their nation in military service and sit upon a jury to serve our justice system. While citizens have a right to vote in elections, they have a responsibility to participate in the political process to uphold the democratic ideals of our nation.

New citizens generally welcome the opportunity to become full members of U.S. society and offer their special gifts to their new homeland. "By becoming citizens, [immigrants] reinforce the equities that they have built in this country and become full partners in the course and life of our nation."⁹ We encourage new citizens to embrace the rights and responsibilities of being a U.S. citizen by honoring the val-

nurturing new citizens so that they may begin to play a full role in the future of this nation.”⁶

Proposed Restrictions to Naturalization

Reports of inadequate oversight and management, failure to implement quality control measures, and general problems regarding the naturalization system in recent years have prompted some in Congress to propose changes to the naturalization process. Unfortunately, some of these proposals would make it more difficult, if not impossible, for many deserving immigrants to attain citizenship.

Proposals that restrict deserving immigrants’ access to U.S. citizenship are particularly troubling considering that the overwhelming majority of immigrants and refugees in this country are of good moral character, enrich our communities, and eagerly await the opportunity to become full-fledged citizens.

The current requirements for citizenship are time-tested. The standards have served our nation well by screening applicants in a manner that ensures their association with the values and laws that govern our land. They should not be changed. Specifically, proposals to extend the length of time required to demonstrate “good moral character” or permanent residency in the United States only serve to delay the naturalization process for deserving immigrants and should be defeated.

Birthright Citizenship

It is equally important that automatic citizenship for individuals born in the United States, regardless of the alienage or status of their parents, remain the constitutional standard for birthright citizenship. We are especially disturbed by proposals to adopt a constitutional amendment that would deny birthright citizenship to children born of noncitizen parents or parents who are not lawful permanent residents admitted into the United States. The denial of birthright citizen-

ues upon which our nation was built—freedom, democracy, and equal protection under the law.

The Role of the Church

The Catholic Church believes that citizenship affirms basic human dignity by allotting full political and legal rights to the individual. Without the ability to participate fully in the political and legal arenas, persons are unable to express fully their views on issues that directly affect their lives.

In light of the current backlog in naturalization applications, we renew our commitment to assist newcomers in becoming citizens. In offering spiritual guidance to newcomers, the Church also is compelled to protect and uphold their rights: "Faithfully carrying out the mandate which she has received from on high, the Church not only strives to offer consolations of religion to all emigrants, but also zealously struggles for the sanction and preservation of the human rights of the person and of the foundations of his spiritual life."¹⁰

Located in rural and urban immigrant communities and mirroring the cultural and ethnic diversity of our great nation, church communities can and do make special contributions to the naturalization process. Local parishes continue to play a vital role in assisting immigrant parishioners in their quests to obtain citizenship. They provide volunteers who assist individuals during the application process, make space available for the administration of citizenship tests and other activities, and distribute literature promoting citizenship. As stated by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1976, "in order to lead the newcomer to full participation in the civic life of the new country, it is important to support programs that help him or her meet the requirements for citizenship."¹¹

While the government has a responsibility to ensure the integrity of the naturalization process, it also is incumbent upon government to ensure its fairness and efficiency. The 1997 decision by Congress to preclude community-based organizations, including church agencies, from providing fingerprinting services to naturalization applicants is troubling.¹² As a result of this decision, community organizations can

no longer provide a variety of naturalization services in one location—the “one-stop shop”—which in the past helped immigrants without resources to avoid making several trips to a local INS office.

Nonprofit organizations can be instrumental in making available essential services to immigrants seeking to naturalize, such as legal counseling, pre-application screening, advocacy, and case management. They are skilled in providing English, civics and history, and acculturation instruction—vital services for many noncitizens who desire to naturalize. Church agencies, such as local Catholic Charities’ programs and the Catholic Legal Immigration Network (CLINIC), are especially qualified to provide assistance to immigrants seeking citizenship. In Los Angeles and San Diego, for example, CLINIC assists the INS by hosting swearing-in ceremonies, welcoming INS officers into CLINIC offices to conduct citizenship interviews, supplying interpreters for such events, as necessary, and providing outreach and education services to the immigrant community.

We urge the INS to continue to seek ways to partner with non-profit community groups experienced with immigrant communities in order to improve services to those undertaking the naturalization process.

Conclusion

Church teaching regarding migration is derived from the words of Jesus to his disciples: “I was . . . a stranger and you welcomed me” (Mt 25:35). As Catholic bishops, our faith tradition compels us to support efforts that recognize the solidarity of all peoples and enable those of all cultures to exercise their full human rights. Naturalization represents an opportunity for all to contribute effectively and wholly to our multicultural society. As citizens, we have a responsibility to assist those who qualify to take advantage of the opportunity to become U.S. citizens.

As our world becomes more of a global village, it is unfortunate that some among us would make less room for those who seek a place at America’s table. Although our nation enjoys one of the highest standards of living in the world, some question the motivations of those who seek citizenship in our country, believing that they threaten our way of life.

As history has taught us, however, new citizens add to the economic, political, and social vitality of our nation. In *One Family Under God*, the bishops' Committee on Migration reaffirmed the valuable contribution of each generation of new Americans: "Throughout the Church's and the nation's experience, time has affirmed the contributions of each successive immigrant group. Though initially derided . . . they have proven valuable far beyond what could have been expected."¹³

We must continually remind ourselves that the overwhelming majority of newcomers aspire to become an integral part of their adopted homeland, conveying enduring values to our families, our churches, and our nation. We must look at the immigrants in our midst not as strangers but as new U.S. citizens in the making who will help us to forge a new and better United States of America.

*Issued by the Committee on Migration of the
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Notes

1. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Cultural Pluralism," April 14, 1980. In *Pastoral Letters of the United States Catholic Bishops*, vol. IV, 1975-1983 (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1983): 375.
2. Citizenship status was conferred upon former African American slaves through the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868 following the Civil War. U.S. Constitution Amendment XXIV, Section 1; See also *Afroyim v. Rusk*, 387 US 253 (1967) (Supreme Court discussion of the Fourteenth Amendment as it relates to the conferral of citizenship upon former African American slaves) .
3. U.S. Constitution, Article I, Section 8, Clause 4 confers the power to Congress "to establish a uniform rule of naturalization." Immigration and Naturalization Act, Section 101 (a)(23) ("the term 'naturalization' means the conferring of nationality of a state upon a person after birth, by any means whatsoever").
4. Fees were increased by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) from \$95 to \$225 per application in January 1999. Current fee-waiver policy is inadequate to protect those who cannot cover the cost.
5. According to the INS, the Exam Fee account funds over \$100 million in legislatively mandated, non-revenue-generating programs.
6. Most Reverend Theodore E. McCarrick, Chairman, Committee on Migration, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Human Dignity through Naturalization," July 1994.
7. *Jus soli* is a principle well-established in English common law that bases citizenship on the place of an individual's birth without regard to alienage or status of their parents. This principle was enshrined in U.S. law in 1868 through the adoption of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. In addition to *jus soli*, the United States recognizes the *jus sanguinis* theory of citizenship, which confers U.S. citizenship on children born abroad to American parents.
8. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Together a New People: Pastoral Statement on Migrants and Refugees* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1986): 10.
9. Most Reverend Theodore E. McCarrick, Chairman, Committee on Migration, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Human Dignity through Naturalization," July 1994.

10. Sacred Congregation of Bishops, *Instruction on the Pastoral Care of People Who Migrate* (Vatican City, August 22, 1969): 7.
11. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Resolution on the Pastoral Concern of the Church for People on the Move," November 11, 1976. In *People on the Move: A Compendium of Church Documents on the Pastoral Concern for Migrants and Refugees* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1988): 66.
12. Fingerprinting services have been taken from community-based organizations and fees for fingerprinting services increased from \$10 to \$25 upon introduction of the INS's first Application Service Center late in 1997.
13. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *One Family Under God: A Statement of the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Migration* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1995): 8.